

# Cook County Records Third-Consecutive Population Decline



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Paolo Cisneros said he faces one of the hardest decisions in his life. He said he was born and raised in Chicago, where he saw the effects of segregation, an experience that influenced him to study community development at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

After he graduates with a master's degree in May, Cisneros and his fiancée will spend a year working in Mexico, but they might not move back to Illinois, he said.

The cost of living seems more reasonable in other places, he said, and local politics have become frustrating, especially when it comes to the gridlock in Springfield over a state budget.

"That creates this kind of tension where on the one hand, we really want to stay and work on a lot of these problems and try to make this city and state a better place, but on the other hand, there's another part of me that thinks, 'Man, it would be nice to live in a place that was run by grownups.'"

Cisneros' dilemma comes as new federal data shows more and more people are choosing to leave the Chicago area.

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Cook County lost more than 21,000 residents in 2016, the largest decline in any county since 2010, according to U.S. Census Bureau estimates released Thursday.

It's the third-consecutive year Cook County has lost population, and [the second-consecutive year it topped the nation in population loss](#).

But the raw figures can be misleading, since Cook is still the second-largest county in the United States after Los Angeles. While Cook had the largest decline, overall population only dropped 0.4 percent over the past year, to around 5.2 million. That rate is comparable to Pittsburgh's Allegheny County, Cleveland's Cuyahoga County or Milwaukee County.

"The declines right now are pretty small, so I would not call them alarming," said Liz Schuh, a principal policy analyst for the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning. "I would call it a continuation of the trends we've been seeing, those that lead to the decline and actually that fueled some small increases, pretty much every year since the recession."

Over the past five years, Cook County has been hit by trends affecting a number of cities. While there are still more births than deaths in the area, that gap has been shrinking as the baby boomer population ages and younger people choose to have children later in life, if at all. The county has also seen international migration at lower levels than in the 2000s.

"The biggest thing is not just something that's affected our region but many other regions, [that] we've experienced a decline in the number of international immigrants that are landing in the region," Schuh said. "That slowed down for us during the recession, and hasn't really returned to the levels it was at."

And while many large cities see negative migration within the United States, Cook County's rate of decline has accelerated over the past three years.

“That’s normal for big, established regions like Chicago, but right now that is returning back to it’s normal level at the same time that we have less international immigrants and fewer people being born,” Schuh said.

Updated figures for Chicago were not available Thursday, though the Chicago metropolitan area — which includes parts of Wisconsin and Indiana — also lost population. Overall the region’s total dropped 0.2 percent to just more than 9.5 million.

Cook County was not the only state jurisdiction that saw a population decline. All but 13 of Illinois’ 102 counties saw losses. Among collar counties around Cook, Kane and Will recorded increases.

“What we’re seeing right now is happening not just in Cook County but all the CMAP region counties, almost all those counties are losing people domestically,” Schuh said. “The region has been slow to recover from the recession. One of the major drivers of where people choose to live is economic opportunity. So if there is a perception there might be less of a chance to get a job or change a job, they may choose to live elsewhere”

The new estimates do not have detailed demographic information or say why people are leaving the area, but there were a host of possible reasons for why someone would want to move last year.

The past year saw the first effects of Mayor Rahm Emanuel’s record-high [property tax increase](#), a countywide [sales tax increase](#) that means Chicago residents pay the highest in the nation, growing uncertainty about the financial stability of [Chicago Public Schools](#), and a surge of gun violence not seen in [two decades](#). And Chicago especially has seen major declines in its African-American population over the past decade.

But Cisneros said the perception of Chicago as a crime-plagued city is what makes him want to stay.

“There is so much good work to be done here,” he said. “This is a really fantastic city, and I’m surprised I’m even considering moving away at some point.”